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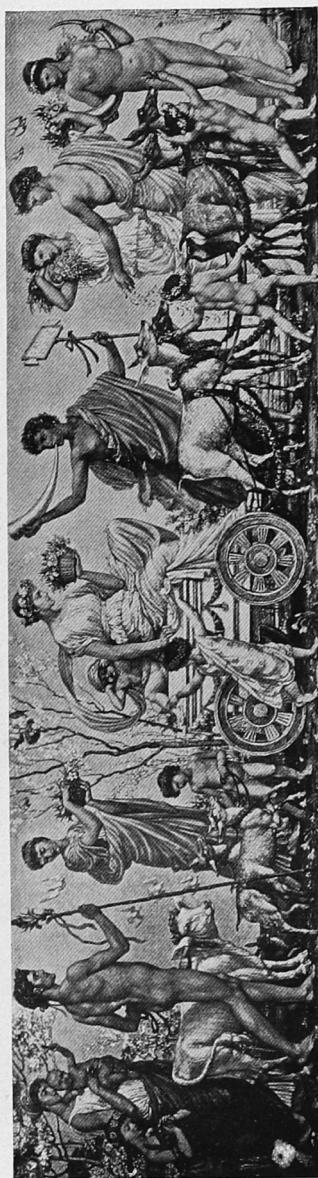
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DECORATIVE FRIEZES  
By Walter Crane

# BRUSH AND PENCIL

ILLUSTRATED ART NEWS SECTION

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## THE ART INDUSTRIES OF AMERICA—XIII

### MURAL PAINTING

Mural painting is an old, old story, dating centuries back in European history; but mural painting in America is, so to speak, a tale of yesterday, taking, if not its rise, at least its impetus, from the World's Fair of 1893 in Chicago. Prior to that time, scant attention had been paid and less encouragement had been accorded to this beautiful branch of decorative art. The start once made, however, the development of mural painting in this country has been unusually rapid, and to-day private home and public edifice are being decorated as never before on this side of the Atlantic by the painter's art. The very citadels of trade, as it has happily been expressed, are hanging out the banner of beauty upon their ramparts.

It is rather curious that this re-birth—birth, perhaps, one had better say, so far as this country is concerned—of the art of mural painting should date from the working out of what was de-



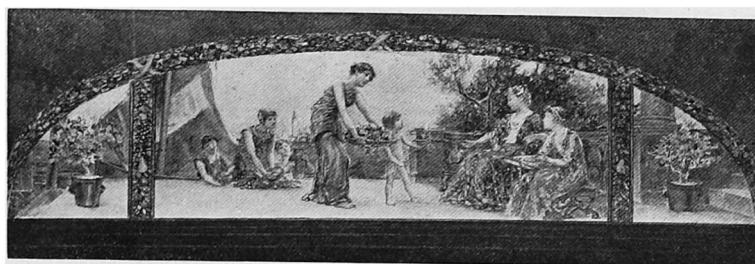
DETAIL OF MURAL PAINTING—ZOOLOGY  
By Oliver Dennett Grover



FLORENCE—SKETCH FOR LUNETTE  
By Will H. Low

signed to be the greatest of all expositions of *material* progress. The projectors of the vast enterprise in Chicago "builded wiser than they knew," little suspecting, as the moving spirits in similar expositions little suspected—artistic pottery took its start from the Centennial in Philadelphia in 1876—the enormous influence their work was to have on the arts of the nation. Prior to the Chicago Fair, a few sporadic instances of mural decoration had been chronicled, as, for instance, the work of La Farge in Trinity Church, Boston, Richardson's masterpiece, in 1876, and that of William M. Hunt's decorations in the New York State Capitol at Albany, in 1878, now, be it said with regret, destroyed. These precursors of the art of to-day stand practically isolated and alone. Most of the artists at the time La Farge and Hunt executed their notable decorations were engaged in making easel-pictures, and they so continued for years afterward. It required some extraordinary incentive and opportunity to awaken both the artists and the public to which they must look for patronage.

That incentive and opportunity came with the fair. The director of the enterprise conceived the idea of making both grounds and buildings so attractive that the dominant impression carried away by the visitor should be one of beauty. The buildings offered broad stretches of wall space, a very essential condition for the artist's ambitious work, and the



VENICE--SKETCH FOR LUNETTE  
By Will H. Low

exposition company had ample funds at its back, another equally essential condition. The men summoned to Chicago realized that they had the chance of which most of them had long dreamed; they became



JUSTICE OF THE LAW—DECORATION IN APPELLATE COURT, NEW YORK

By E. E. Simmons

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enthused with the passion to excel, and they worked by day and planned by night with a devotion to their respective tasks that made the fair, as regards their part of it, an artistic triumph.

Nothing impresses the average person like an ocular demonstration, and as regards mural decorations, that was just what was furnished the public in 1893. Private persons of wealth, officials of institutions and

officers of state saw the possibilities of the art, and were quick to give it encouragement. Thus to this fellowship of work through the day and evenings spent in consultation may be traced, as has before been pointed out in BRUSH AND PENCIL, the very considerable growth of decorative art which in a few short years has accomplished so much — much more than can here be described. Suffice it to say that one of the most hopeful features of it all is the general character of its manifestation. The desire to enrich and to decorate buildings is not confined to any one section of the country nor to any one class of building. Bowdoin College, in far-off Maine, through the generosity of a well-wisher, has four great mural paintings decorating its art-gallery; the Boston Public Library has paintings by Abbey, Sargent, and Puvis de Chavannes, and the Blackstone Library, Chicago, others by Grover; a bank in busy Pittsburg has two large lunettes by Blashfield and Millet and other institutions in Chicago are similarly decorated; the criminal and appellate courts in New York, and several hotels in Chicago, New York, and Boston have enlisted the services of our painters, as have the State-houses, of Pennsylvania, Minnesota, and Iowa; private houses without number, of various pretensions, have added mural decorations; and the Congressional Library at Washington has literally become a treasure-house of the painter's art.

To trace the evolution of the mural painter's art is no part of this article. Suffice it to say that mural decorations, whatever be the theme, and wherever and whenever executed, are but a manifestation of people's innate love of pictures that find expression in so many different ways. It has, of course, its own special characteristics that distinguish it from other branches of pictorial art. The mural decoration, for instance, as Will H. Low, one of the best exponents of the art, explains, is made for and conforms to the place and to the light where it is best seen; it helps and is helped by the lines of its architectural surrounding; it is to last presumably as long as the building where it is placed, and its subject therefore cannot be trivial or ephemeral. It is on a scale fitted to its surroundings, and generally far enough removed from the eye to preclude petty details obtruding themselves to the detriment of the larger, nobler aspect of the whole. These are but few of the qualities inherent in a successful mural decoration, and they may be and are violated at will in the detached picture born of a passing fancy on the part of the artist, or suggested by a prevailing level of taste on the part of the purchasing, determining public. Mural painting is simply this — a picture painted for a special place; and if it be the painting of an exhumed wineshop in Pompeii, as Mr. Low says, or Michael Angelo's ceiling in the Sistine Chapel, its object is one and the same. Hence, it is by no means necessary that the mural painter should be given vast spaces to cover. The most modest of our homes may be decorated as were the houses of Pompeii; the simplest village church can engage anew the painter as the primitive masters of Italy were engaged; no town need be too small to have its



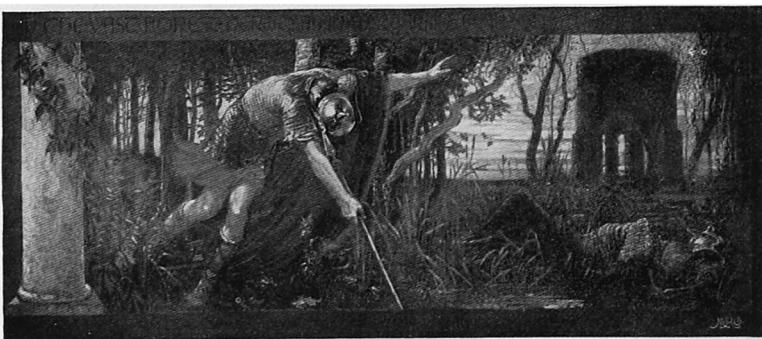
THE SKELETON IN ARMOR I—FRIEZE

By Walter Crane

town-hall or its schoolhouse become an object-lesson in beauty, carrying in its turn some lesson in civic virtue—something to elevate the public.

As regards the practical work of the mural painter, nothing will give the reader a better idea of the conditions to be met, the difficulties to be overcome, and the manner of executing commissions, than a concrete instance, and no one, perhaps, that can be selected offers itself to better advantage than the decorations of the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, New York, executed by Mr. Low. I will let the artist tell his own story, as narrated in a lecture to art students, since it is detailed enough to meet the needs of the intelligent reader.

"The first consideration which presents itself to a mural painter," says Mr. Low, "is that of the character of the room which he is asked to decorate. In the case of the Waldorf-Astoria, the room, while known



THE SKELETON IN ARMOR, II—FRIEZE

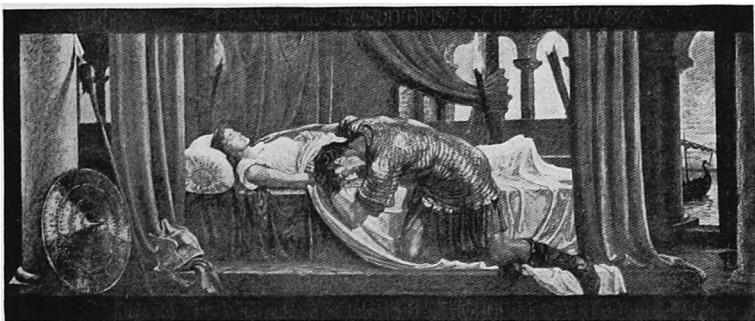
By Walter Crane



THE SKELETON IN ARMOR, III—FRIEZE  
By Walter Crane

as the ball-room, was equally intended to be used for entertainments, in which music was to be the chief feature. Hence, the general theme of music was suggested. Theatrical entertainments being also given there, the drama demanded recognition. Lastly, as the room was in a hotel in a peculiarly cosmopolitan city, likely to open its doors to guests from all nations, some direct allusion to those presumptive guests seemed in place. The spaces allotted to me were twenty in number. Fourteen of these were oval spaces in the cove of the room, and six were semicircular panels, two of which were at one end of the room and four at the other. The oval spaces were seven feet in height by five in width, and the nearest point to the spectator was twenty-eight feet from the floor. This distance necessitated the use of figures considerably over life size.

"In the fourteen ovals, therefore, I placed as many figures of women, each typical of a country, with a typical musical instrument of that country. As the subdivisions of the world are more than fourteen in number,



THE SKELETON IN ARMOR IV—FRIEZE  
By Walter Crane



LADY OF SHALOTT—MURAL PANEL  
By George Bernard Benton



LANCELOT—MURAL PANEL  
By George Bernard Benton

it was necessary to make a choice, and I own I was largely governed in this by the possible future patrons of the hotel. Another difficulty presented itself in the choice of musical instruments. Our own country, for instance, can hardly be said to have a national musical instrument, unless it be the banjo, and that in some way would have seemed to necessitate the portrayal of a colored woman. This difficulty I overcame by making America typical of vocal music. Russia again presented the same lack of a recognizable typical instrument of music. Disdaining the wicked suggestion of a friend that Russia could play on a samovar, I depicted her with a string of sleigh-bells.

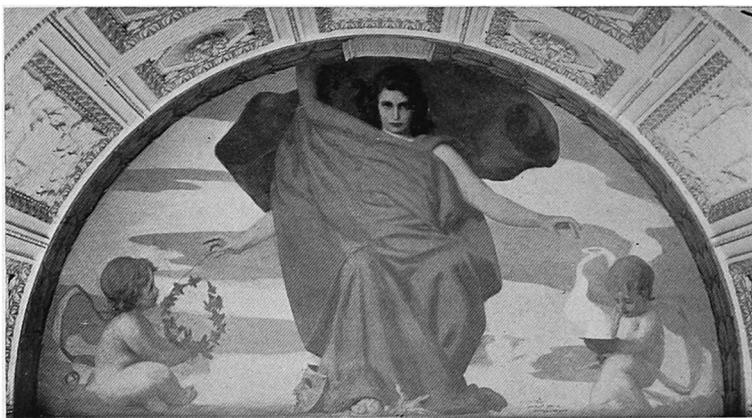
"The lunettes, as the semicircular panels are called, which were twelve feet long, afforded me opportunity for compositions with a number of figures. Between the two principal lunettes I distributed those patron saints of the arts, the Muses. In one, Terpsichore dances in the center to the music of a lyre played by Apollo. In the other, Melpomene declaims, while Homer, resting on his lyre, listens. The others of the nine sisters are grouped about in guise of audience. I sought by the introduction of Apollo in the one panel to suggest the mythological side of art; and by Homer in the other, its more human interests. The other four lunettes were, respectively, the music of the sea, mermaidens blowing through trumpet-shaped shells to the accompaniment of the waves; the music of the woods, Echo vainly leading on two wondering mortals; the music of peace, which was pastoral in character; and the music of war. All these might be thought to run the gamut of the emotions inspired by music.

"Such was my conception of the task before me. Now a word as to the means of execution. As in all enterprises of like kind here in this country, there was need of haste. The accumulation of interest on an investment in a building of this magnitude before it can be operated and earning money is a serious matter. On the first day of May, therefore, the artists engaged for the decoration were told that their work must be in place on November 1st. My portion of this work amounted to one thousand and ninety feet of canvas to cover. The three other artists, Messrs. Blashfield, Simons, and Turner, had less space to cover, though Mr. Blashfield's ceiling for the same room in which my panels are placed presented great mechanical difficulties. It may be imagined, however, that all four of these men led a strenuous life throughout a busy summer. In my own case, a calculation made since it is all over shows that I was forced to complete one of my panels every eleventh day.

"Of course I was obliged to seek assistance, and in this I was fortunate in finding two of my friends, both men of very different temperament from my own, chosen for that peculiarity in order to counteract by friendly opposition excesses in conception or treatment into which my own adventurous spirit might lead me. For not the least danger which work executed in such haste is liable to lead one to, is the desire to achieve too much in the time allotted. Here my two assistants in kindly spirit often pointed out the mechanical impossibility of carrying out in the given period all

that my too great enthusiasm might have led me to attempt, and this limitation proved to be of value. My debt to these men is therefore all the greater, for to them fell the task of executing work which in character — design, color, everything — should be essentially my own.

"To this end, I painted small, carefully finished studies of each of my compositions; these were then photographed to make lantern-slides. As these studies are in the same proportion as the larger spaces to be filled, these lantern-slides, by means of the stereopticon, were thrown on the



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large canvas. This we did evenings and in the dark. We would go over the outlines on the large canvas with pencils, thus securing a perfectly drawn enlargement of the small study. Then the small study would be copied by my assistants, in color, upon these outlines, and each of my larger canvases would be thus prepared for my final retouching.

"In this way a surprising amount of work may be accomplished, and as it is simply an enlarged copy of the small study, the artist who is responsible for the final result finds his work half done. My studio, which is in the country, a short distance from New York, was built expressly for decorative work, and one of its conveniences is a large opening in the floor, about eighteen inches wide, running about thirty feet, the full length of the studio. About this I hang my canvas on pulleys, which enables me to drop it through the floor, in order to work on the upper portion of the picture, and allows me to dispense with ladders and scaffolding.

"You may have noticed that I speak of doing all my work on canvas. The modern decorative painter differs from the earlier members of this craft who worked in fresco. Fresco, from the Latin word meaning fresh,



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was literally painting on newly laid plaster. The pigment used was a form of water-color, and the painter had each day the ground of the portion of the picture which he wished to paint freshly laid, the next day proceeding in like manner until the picture was finished. To-day we think that for our climate and for the houses which we build, it is safer to paint on canvas with oil-color. When the painting is finished, the space which it is to cover on the wall is smeared with white lead, of the consistency of paste. The back of the canvas is covered with the same material, and it is then pressed on the wall. The white lead, drying, causes perfect adhesion, and the canvas becomes an integral portion of the wall.

"I have described at some length the choice of subjects. Even more important, from the painter's point of view, are the questions of the arrangement of figures to harmonize with the surrounding architectural lines, of the color to harmonize with the general coloration of the room, and the scale of the figures, so that they may not appear too large or too small for the place they occupy. The qualities which insure this harmony are those which determine the rank of the decorator. No hard-and-fast rule can be made, and no amount of study will replace the intuitive faculty in this regard. The artist must work with a mental vision of the completed work before him, and must be able in his studio to judge of the future effect of his work when seen in place. The greatest decorator of modern times, Puvis de Chavannes, once told me that it was his habit to sit in the building where his decoration was to be, in front of the space which it was to fill, until, as he expressed it, he 'saw' it on the wall. 'Then,' said he, 'I can return to my studio, and it is surprising how little the completed picture differs from the mental vision which I first saw in place.'"



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As regards the function and the beneficent influence of mural painting, I cannot do better than to close this article by quoting a few more words by Mr. Low, once printed in *BRUSH AND PENCIL*, in which he voices a danger and a promise that many in these latter days have felt. Says he: "In our workaday world, in the battle of material interests we are in danger of becoming mere human machines. To turn from grave concerns of every-day life to nurse deliberately our imaginative faculty is impossible. But to surround ourselves with paintings which stimulate thought, to read history, or prophecy on a wall, almost unconsciously, needs only the united will of many citizens. If we have the public spirit which the citizens of old Florence evinced six centuries ago, we can do this. In the marts of commerce, in the halls of legislative deliberation, in the courts of justice, and in our libraries and schools, await many fair wall spaces. Give these to the mural painter, and you will do two things. You will bring into your daily life a message of spiritual aspiration which he who runs may read, and you will help to create that great civilizing force which every truly great nation has had, and which we as yet lack, a national school of art."

WILLIAM T. ROBERTS.

